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Pico and the Rutland Winter Carnival



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Two young people advertising the Rutland Winter Carnival.

About the Author



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Introduction

This is primarily the story of the Rutland Winter Carnival that took place annually from 1951-1960. These carnivals were possible because of the neighboring Pico Mountain and the role it played in the development of alpine skiing in America. There are numerous references to the history of Pico. This information should help to illuminate this unique time in Rutland's history and the special collaborations between the city and Pico. The first rope tow in the country was installed on the site of what is now the Suicide Six ski area in Woodstock. Pico opened a few years later in 1937 and operated for almost 15 years before the excitement of this new sport was fully realized in Rutland and the Chamber of Commerce decided to act. For more information on Pico's fascinating history, see *Pico, Vermont, and the Development of Alpine Skiing in the United States* by Linda Goodspeed.

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Pico and the Rutland Winter Carnival

By Nathan Allen

Early Pico and Alpine Skiing

By the beginning of the 1940's, the sport of skiing was fast outgrowing the limited rope tow. The founders of Pico, Janet and Brad Mead, visited European resorts looking for better uphill transportation methods. In Switzerland, they encountered a T-Bar and successfully built one of their own at Pico in 1941. The new lift allowed Pico to expand and 1941 saw a record amount of skiers. An estimated 10,000 skiers visited Pico near Washington's Birthday that year. Automobiles were parked along Route 4 for two miles. After another busy year, it was clear to the Meads that further expansion was going to be necessary. A chairlift was now in operation on Mount Mansfield while newcomer Bromley Mountain in Peru was also showing promise. It looked like skiing in Vermont was here to stay. However, on 7 December 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and the United States had entered World War II. Founder Brad Mead was diagnosed with tuberculosis around this time and he died at the age of 37 in an apparent boating accident on Chittenden Reservoir on 26 September 1942. Undoubtedly he was weakened from his battle with the disease. Brad's wife Janet was now managing the ski area by herself. During this time, Americans were facing unprecedented uncertainty and angst. A luxury like a ski vacation may have seemed frivolous to many. Wartime rationing and shortages affected food, fuel, manpower and transportation. Many American skiers joined the 10th Mountain Division and served overseas. Such was the case for Karl Acker who was the face of Pico's ski school and a famous import from Switzerland. The American ski industry stagnated during the war years and skiing-related businesses started to close across the country. Pico managed to stay afloat during these meager years and the mountain was rewarded for its struggle by some postwar prosperity. A major boost to the American industry in general was the return of the 10th Mountain Division. These men, estimated at about 50,000 had been trained by some of the best in the world and they brought their love of skiing back home. Despite a better economic outlook, inflation and competition from other mountains hindered Pico at the end of the 1940s. Little had been done in the way of improvements since the T-Bar

was installed in 1941. Bromley and Stowe were both expanding and Mad River Glen opened in 1948 with an impressive mile-long chairlift. It was local supporters who helped Pico stay in business despite poor snow years and the struggle to be competitive. The Ski School and, in particular, the junior racing program became well known for excellence. One of Janet Mead's own children, Andrea Mead, was a particularly promising young athlete.

The Carnivals

At the end of 1950 and the beginning of 1951, it may have been that the Rutland Chamber of Commerce was longing for the days when trains full of skiers arrived regularly and lodging spaces and restaurants were full. Whatever the impetus, it was announced that the Rutland Chamber would be cooperating with other local civic groups as well as the Pico ski area to host an annual winter carnival. It was decided that the carnival should take place during the long weekend of Washington's Birthday. In 1951, it was February 22-24 and the Lions Club, the Rotary and the Kiwanis, amongst others, organized a program of events that included multiple days of competitive skiing, a boxing exhibition, ice skating, a hockey game, a professional basketball game and a ball at the Meadowbrook Roller Rink to wrap everything up and present awards. What was perhaps the most sought after award during the carnivals had nothing to do with skiing or any other sport. It was the selection of the carnival queen that really piqued the public's interest. Thousands of people voted for high school aged girls that had lengthy biographies posted in the *Rutland Herald*. The first year saw over 200 revelers at the celebration dance while Frances Callahan was crowned Queen. After the first carnival drew to a close, Chamber of Commerce President Samuel Stowell and carnival chairman A.B. Porter called the project a "reasonable success." This was despite the fact that warm weather plagued the events in Rutland. The snow sculpture competition and the hockey game had to be cancelled but more than a foot of fresh snow at Pico meant that parking lots were filled to capacity all weekend.

The carnival in 1952 was perfectly timed. Andrea Mead, daughter of Pico founders Janet and Brad, had quietly become the best skier in America during the last few years. In 1948, Andrea was the youngest member of the United States Olympic Team at age 15. It wasn't until 4 years later, in Oslo, Norway, that Andrea made her presence felt on the world stage. She won two Olympic gold medals that year, the first in the women's Giant Slalom. It was the first appearance of that dis-

cipline in the Olympics. Andrea also won the slalom by a practically unheard of margin of 2 seconds. Andrea's claiming of two Olympic gold medals in the same games are still unmatched in US skiing history and it was a huge deal back home in Vermont. The fervor coincided with the Second Annual Rutland/Pico Carnival and Mother Nature certainly cooperated. Near blizzard conditions and two feet of snow a week ahead



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Creating an ice sculpture of Andrea Mead, prominent Rutland skier.

of time created what the *Rutland Herald* called "perfect conditions" as an estimated 2000 people watched the ski races at Pico. The schedule of events included a basketball tournament with 8 teams, a hockey game between Norwich and Champlain College and a cherry pie baking contest sponsored by CVPS. Of course there were the very well-attended ski races that saw competitors from every conceivable age and ability. Racers as young as six years old shared the day with ski clubs from near and far. Over 60 Olympic veterans as well as college athletes from all over New England were in attendance. 1952 saw the Vermont State Championships of skiing decided at Pico and it is notable that Rutland citizen Anne Jones won the women's field. Interest in the coronation ball heightened and an article in the *Rutland Herald* remarked that ballots had been received from multiple states. The ball was again held at Meadowbrook Roller Rink and Leila Goodrich was crowned Queen. The carnival organizers were lucky enough to have cold temperatures for a twenty act show by the Junctioneers Skating Club of Claremont, NH. If there was any doubt about the viability of an annual carnival in Rutland, the successes of 1952 must have helped put those fears to rest.

1953 saw a new carnival chairman replace Mr. Porter. It was Henry Carris who oversaw a carnival that added a torchlight parade snaking its way down the slopes of Pico. Fireworks were also an exciting addition as well as night skiing which rounded out the evening festivities. The admission for that night was 75 cents for adults and 50 cents for students. 1953 saw the organizers really developing the coronation ball. The ball was held at The Armory this year which allowed for greater attendance and entertainment of a grander scale. Two orchestras were enjoyed this year one of which consisted of 16 instruments. The other was a Canadian Square Dancing outfit. Rutland expanded its offerings further with its biggest ice show yet. 1953 saw ballots for carnival queen stream in from as far away as Texas. June Herrick was crowned as queen.

The weather conspired against the carnival of 1954. Rain and mild temperatures forced cancellation of only two events which was considered fortuitous considering the conditions. Warm temperatures made the ice show and hockey impossible. Despite the dire forecast, the *Herald* ran an article with the headline "Skiers Mob State Resorts". It was called the biggest winter weekend in the state's history. The Vermont Transit Company reported that extra busses had to be put on routes to deal with the influx of visitors. Four thousand people were estimated to have visited Pico that Saturday and hundreds braved the downpour of

rain to witness the torchlight parade. Friday evening saw the "Jumping Jack" Race. A jack-jumper is a single ski with a seat on it. Jack jumping would remain a popular part of the winter festival for years to come.



Left to right: Dr. Carleton Stickney, Robert Bloomer and "Kelly" Coffin display their "Jack Jumpers".

The coronation ball, held at The Armory, had Garry Stevens, WRGB television star and his "TV Showcase" Orchestra as well as a square dancing band. Mary Lou Reedy was queen in 1954. It is also reported that 1954 was the year that Perry Merrill, again, started to take a keen interest in developing Killington Peak. Merrill is considered the father of Vermont's State Parks as well as the alpine skiing development in those parks. Perry Merrill was also the Vermont state land lease officer and forester. As early as the 1940s he had talked about developing Killington. A famous partnership with founder Preston Smith was soon formed but it would still be several years before the Killington resort properly developed and opened. It was the beginning of a remarkable period of growth. In the 1954-1955 season there were 78 ski areas in the country. Just ten years later there would be 662. It was also in

1954 that ownership of Pico changed hands. Longtime ski instructor Karl Acker purchased the area from founder Janet Mead and instituted some much needed changes and improvements. Karl and his wife June would run Pico and as they were very short on cash, Karl did much of the work singlehandedly.

Rutland is known for a love of parades so it should come as no surprise that in 1955 a winter carnival parade was added to the schedule. Local civic groups, military veterans, carnival queen hopefuls and others marched through the streets of Rutland amongst throngs of onlookers.



In 1955 a Winter Carnival parade was added to the program.

The *Herald* reported that it was "favored by the best possible weather – perfect throughout. Carnival time brought out crowds of fun seekers that shattered attendance figures at about every event in the program". 1955 had jack-jumping contests, sugar on snow, fireworks, sled races, and an ever growing selection of races at Pico that was now drawing international competitors as well as locals. Garry Stevens was again a part of the Coronation Ball that saw Joan Looker crowned as Queen.



Robert Wagner, new movie star, poses with Joan Looker, the new 1955 Rutland Winter Carnival queen.



The success of the winter carnival got Joan Looker a spot on the Dave Garroway national TV show.

1955 also saw the introduction of a "fun figure" named the Hambassador of Slobbovia.

Under the leadership of Chairman Alfred Beauchamp, the carnival was extended to four days in 1956. It was Thursday night that was the welcome party including the jack jumping, torchlight parade and moonlight skiing among other events at Pico. On Friday there was a square dance jamboree at the Community House in Rutland and Saturday was the giant carnival parade and the coronation ball. Mary Lou Davis was crowned queen of the 1956 Winter Carnival. The parade was held in a blinding snowstorm in 1956 but that didn't seem to deter any onlookers and record crowds were reported. The ball again featured Garry Stevens who was becoming a popular feature of the yearly event.



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For a number of years Garry Stevens provided a 16-piece orchestra from WRGB-TV in New York State.

All ski racing was done on Sunday at Pico. The "fun figure" this year was called Mopey and he was a favorite with the children, as he gave out candy and inspired silliness.

A few days before the 1957 carnival, the newspaper declared that the

“town has been sold out for several days”. The article went on to interview the members of the dozens of clubs that were staying in various hotels and lodges all over the area. Skiers from Philadelphia, New York City, New Jersey and Connecticut travelled to Pico to race and enjoy the festivities in Rutland as well. The ice show this year had nearly 200 participants and Friday night had what was billed as “Rutland’s first jazz concert” at the Rutland Armory. The normal Cherry Pie baking contest, sled races, and parade were all very popular this year and the weather cooperated very well. Gene Rayburn, a comedian and star of NBC shows like the Steve Allen Show, was supposed to be on hand during the four day 1957 carnival. His name was advertised heavily in all available media outlets. But Mr. Rayburn broke his leg skiing in Stowe the day before his scheduled appearances in Rutland. He spent the duration of the carnival in a Morrisville hospital. The queen in 1957 was Bette Mae Ladabouche.



Queen Bette Mae Ladabouche and her court in 1957 exemplify the grandeur of the Coronation Ball of the Winter Carnival.

1958 saw a decreased amount of media coverage of the winter carnival. A blizzard on Saturday forced the cancellation of the Ice Show as the final event of the carnival. It was noted in the newspaper that the Jazz concert on Friday was popular and attracted about 1,000 people. As always, the Coronation Ball with Garry Stevens was well attended. 2,000 people were reported to have packed the Rutland Armory in 1958 to see Judy Peake become queen. Earlier in the 1958 season, Killington opened and enjoyed a rather large early season snowfall. A storm near Thanksgiving dumped two to three feet of snow. Four surface lifts were in operation on Snowdon Peak for the inaugural season and the area developed well above industry standards in the years to come. Another surface lift was installed in 1959 and terrain was available on Killington Peak itself. In 1960, a double chairlift that ran over 6000 feet was opened. Karl Acker, after having owned Pico for only four years suffered a massive heart attack this year and passed away. Now, for the second time in Pico's short history, the mountain was being run by a young widow.

The 1959 Carnival started off on the Thursday before Lincoln's Birthday with a sugar on snow party at Pico. The local newspaper commented that turnout was not as high as it had been in years past. On Friday night, the focus shifted to the Rutland Fairgrounds where there was an ice show. Little Sun Valley Skating Club performed a revue and Sharon Strauss performed songs. She was billed as a "favorite from the 1958 Rutland Fair". A torchlight baton exhibition was performed by "Miss Drum Majorette of Vermont", Rhoda Wooddell. Fireworks were on display that Friday and it was all presented by Bill Hickok from WPTR in Albany. A square dance was at the Meadowbrook Roller Rink as well. Rutland was the focus of Saturday's events as well with the parade and the coronation ball. Burnham Stearns, chairman of the carnival was on hand to award Sandra Jean Miglorie the crown in 1959. She was awarded a week-long vacation to the Virgin Islands for two, an exciting addition to the vibrant popularity contest. Snow arrived just in time to make the skiing competition at Pico a real success.

The three day affair of 1960 changed the lineup considerably. More skiing was added at the Rutland Country Club, especially for the junior competitors. The sugar on snow party was moved to Rutland as well. The popular opening day party at Pico was replaced by a Talent Contest at the Rutland Armory and it was reported that 2,000 people attended. Even the enduringly popular Coronation Ball was moved to the MSJ auditorium.

In years past, the skiing competitions at Pico were the only scheduled events for the day. However, in 1960, the program of events included an ice show and a party at Rotary Field while the skiing was going on at Pico.



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Skating was frequently a part of the Winter Carnival program but often a victim of the weather.

In a *Rutland Herald* article that summarized the 1960 carnival, Suzanne Coleman was congratulated as Queen. Some of the exuberance and excitement was missing from the article though. Some events were cancelled due to warm weather preceding the event, but Sunday saw bitter temperatures and a “howling blizzard”. The worst combination when it comes to New England weather. “Cooperation for the 1960 carnival was excellent” said Emerson Peake, the chairman. Vermont Governor Robert Stafford was on hand to attend the Coronation Ball this year as well.

1960 would be the last Rutland Pico Winter Carnival. No official reason was discovered for the discontinuation but some guesses could be made about the reasons. The ski industry in Vermont was expanding

Winter Carnival



Frances Callahan
1951



Leila Goodrich
1952



Jane Herrick
1953



Bette Mae Ladabouche
1957



Judith Peake
1958

Photos:
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at a furious pace and Pico wasn't keeping up. Mount Snow was becoming phenomenally successful with many of the amenities expected from a modern ski area. Killington was also expanding exponentially. Local Chambers of Commerce as well as the Vermont State officials began to look closely at how they were marketing this new and profitable pastime. Regions were promoted, or the state of Vermont as a whole. A car-

Queens 1951 - 1960



Mary Lou Reedy
1954



Joan Looker
1955



Mary Lou Davis
1956



Sandra Miglorie
1959



Suzanne Coleman
1960

nival like the Rutland Pico affair was too localized. A look into minutes from Chamber of Commerce meetings also revealed that the carnival was losing money. Such an endeavor relies heavily on volunteers who may have retired or moved away. The carnival had perhaps run its course and it no longer fit into the big business of ski area development.



"The Iceman Cometh"- His Excellency, the Hambassador from Lower Slobbovia as played by Art Ross of Rutland.